



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

Gayl Jones

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There are things that a woman sings, and only a woman knows the full meaning. You may sing for men as well as for women, but only a woman knows your full meaning. I am not a feminist. I only think a woman should be true to who she believes herself to be. Or who she wants herself to be. Or who she imagines herself to be. I don't know what I mean, or whether I'm true myself to any of that. I don't think there are many of us who are true to our possibilities.

— The Healing (1998)

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * African-American novelist, poet, and scholar
- * Published *Corregidora*, her first novel, in 1975

Biography

In a 1982 interview, Gayl Jones said that just like most people, she felt “connections to home territory-connections that go into one’s ideas of language, personality, landscape” (Rowell 52). Born to Franklin and Lucille Jones on November 23, 1949 in Lexington, Kentucky, Jones’ early “connections” with the South are reflected strongly in her personal life as well as in her writing, which often brings Kentucky culture and characters to life for the reader. Much of her desire to write came from her maternal grandmother, Amanda Wilson, who wrote plays for church productions, as well as from her mother, Lucille Jones, who wrote short stories, many of them in order to entertain Gayl and her brother Franklin Jr. Jones says, “I have to say that if my mother hadn’t written and read to me when I was growing up I probably wouldn’t have even thought about it at all” (Rowell 53). In elementary school, several of Jones’ instructors saw through her painfully shy exterior to the talented author blooming within and encouraged her to continue writing.

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Gayl Jones

Biography continued

After finishing high school, Jones took a considerable step away from her hometown and the South when she moved to Connecticut to attend Connecticut College. Her education there was funded through scholarships and in 1971 she received her Bachelors of Arts degree in English. She was accepted into the graduate studies creative writing program at Brown University, where two years later she earned her Masters degree and saw her first play, *Chile Woman*, produced. By 1975, she had earned her Doctorate of Arts degree in creative writing.

During her years at Brown, Jones studied under poet Michael Harper, who introduced her first novel *Corregidora* (Random House 1975) to Toni Morrison, who became her editor. Following graduation, Jones' second novel, *Eva's Man* (Random House 1976) was published. She then began teaching at Wellesley College and later took a position as an assistant professor of English and Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. During her years at the University of Michigan, Jones wrote a collection of short stories called *White Rat* (Random House 1977), a volume-length poem *Songs for Anninho* (Lotus Press 1981), and another volume of poetry titled *The Hermit-Woman* (Lotus Press 1983). While tenured at Michigan, Jones received fellowships first from the National Endowment for the Arts and another from the Michigan Society of Fellows. She also met and married Robert Higgins, a politically active student, who eventually took her last name in marriage.

Jones and husband left the United States in the early 1980s due to legal problems. During this time, Jones published another novel, *Die Vogel-faengerin* (*The Birdwatcher*) in Germany as well as a collection of poetry entitled *Xarque and Other Poems* (Lotus Press 1985) in the United States. Her first book of criticism, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Harvard University Press 1991), was published soon after Jones and her husband returned to the United States in 1988. After living very privately in Lexington for ten years, Jones came again into the media spotlight for the release of a new novel, *The Healing* (Beacon Press 1998), which became a finalist in the National Book Award competition.





Gayl Jones

Biography continued

Unfortunately, the success of Jones' new novel was overshadowed by the media attention given to a confrontation involving her husband and the police, which ended in his suicide. Immediately after, Jones was placed in a mental institution under suicide watch for a short time but was soon released without incident. Just one year later her latest novel, *Mosquito* (Beacon Press 1999) was published. Jones' life has come full circle as she once again lives a secluded life in Lexington, Kentucky, and continues to write.

Although she has written in genres such as poetry, short stories, and critical essays, Jones is best known for her novels. Her first and perhaps most widely known novel, *Corregidora* was published when Jones was only 26 years old. The plot begins in 1947 and centers on Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who continues her familial legacy of "making generations," "passing it on," and "bearing witness" through the medium of singing. Charged with passing down her family's history of slavery and abuse, Ursa takes the role of a storyteller. Her character often relates the terrible, bone-chilling events that happened to her grandmothers: the slaves, concubines, and prostitutes of Corregidora, a 19th century Brazilian plantation owner. Ursa uses traditional oral storytelling techniques in delivering her stories. Jones herself has commented on her use of this type of narration in an interview with Roseanne P. Bell in *Sturdy Black Bridges*. "One of the things I was consciously concerned with was the technique from the oral storytelling tradition that could be used in writing. A story is told to someone in much the same way when Ursa sings. She picks out someone to sing to. The book has layers of storytelling. Perceptions of time are important in the oral storytelling tradition in the sense that you can make rapid transitions between one period and the next, sort of direct transitions" (Bell, Parker and Guy-Sheftall 285).



Gayl Jones

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Much of Jones' work also explores a theme of contradictory, coexisting emotions. This theme, specifically of love and hate, is especially visible in *Corregidora* when Ursa and her mother discuss the Grandmothers' relationships with their former owner and lover, Corregidora:

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“I think what really made them dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask. “

“What was that?”

“How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love.”

(*Corregidora* 131)

” ”

Jones comments on the use of this theme in an interview with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work*: “I was and continue to be interested in contradictory emotions that coexist . . . I think people can hold two different emotions simultaneously” (Tate 95).

Her next novel was published only one year later and is perhaps the most controversial work she has written. *Eva's Man* is the story of a young woman, Eva Medina Canada, who because of a long history of severe sexual and emotional abuse, ends up in a mental institution for murdering her lover and castrating him with her teeth.



Gayl Jones

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The subject of controversy surrounding the novel centers upon positive race imagery. Some African-American women authors have criticized the novel by stating that it creates characters that perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans and women. June Jordan commented on this in a May 16, 1976 article in *The New York Times Book Review* by stating: "...there is the very real, upsetting accomplishment of Gayl Jones in this, her second novel: sinister misinformation about women--about women, in general, about black women in particular, and especially about young black girls forced to deal with the sexual, molesting violations of their minds and bodies by their fathers, their mothers' boyfriends, their cousins and uncles. . . As for the Eve/Medusa/Queen Bee facets of the tale. . . rather than renew or revise ideas about the female, these chapters perpetuate "crazy whore"/ "castrating bitch" images that long have defamed black women in our literature" (Riley and Mendelson 266). Jones herself responds to this kind of criticism in her interview with Claudia Tate: "I put those images in the story to show how myths or ways in which men perceive women actually define women's characters." She further justifies her position by stating: "Right now I'm not sure how to reconcile the things that interest me with 'positive race images.' . . For instance, how would one reconcile an interest in neurosis or insanity with positive race image?" (Tate 97-98).

Written almost 25 years after her first novels *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*, one of Jones' more recent novels, *The Healing*, draws on many of the same psychological themes and oral storytelling techniques from her earlier works. This novel tells the story of Harlan Jane Eagleton, hairdresser, rock star manager and horse racetrack gambler turned faith healer, who travels about the world healing and telling people about her gift of healing. According to several people in one of the towns she visits for healing meetings, her first healing defined the secret of her trade: "What were her first healing? She healed herself. Aw, girl you don't believe that! Yes, I believe it, 'cause that's the proof of a true healer. They's got to heal theyself first. You's got to work your own salvation first." (*The Healing* 1998) Jones draws on the African-American oral tradition of storytelling, using Black English and stream-of-consciousness narration that fuses time and place throughout the novel. Earlier themes such as the male-female relationship, and references to Brazilian culture are expanded upon in this novel. Harlan's relationships with her lovers and her development of her own identity are reflected in the Brazilian myth of the turtle-woman named Jaboti woven throughout the pages.



Gayl Jones

Biography continued

A question that often comes to the readers of Jones' psychologically abnormal and physically brutal narratives is: What exactly is it in Jones as an author that causes or inspires her to write such incredibly violent and painful-to-read stories of abuse? In response to the question posed to her by Claudia Tate, "Can you say what inspired you to write *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*?" she responds: "Aside from seeing myself outside of the conventional roles of wife and mother, my interest in Brazilian history, and my wanting to make some kind of relationship between history and autobiography, I cannot. As for *Eva's Man*, I can never really think of any reason why I wrote it. It is easier to talk intellectually about *Corregidora* than *Eva's Man*. I generally think of *Eva's Man* as a kind of dream or nightmare, something that comes to you, and you write it down." (Tate 99)

Although Jones' work has often been contested because of her controversial subjects as well as news coverage of her personal life, her work continues to awe readers with its complex style and depth of emotion. She draws many of the themes in her stories from her African-American heritage as well as her own personal life and struggles. Perhaps most important throughout the psychological developments in the characters are their voices which shout from the pages of her work their story, their song, and their truth. Her readers cannot wait to hear what will come next from this quiet woman who writes out loud.



Gayl
Jones

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